

*Selling “Sites of Desire”: Paradise in
Reality Television, Tourism, and
Real Estate Promotion in Vanuatu*

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Visual representations and narrative accounts of Pacific landscapes matter. Long-established ideas of the Pacific as paradise are not empty tropes; rather, they are instrumental in the ongoing recolonization of Indigenous landscapes by foreigners. Beginning with the experience of the filming of *Survivor: Vanuatu—Islands of Fire* in North Efate, located just twenty-five minutes from Port Vila, this article describes how the television series resulted in a rapacious demand by expatriate investors to lease customary land. Building from the filming of *Survivor*, this article explores how real estate and tourism campaigns in Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific cultivate foreign desire in ways that both motivate and enable the possession of Indigenous landscapes. Pacific real estate and tourism campaigns offer visions of paradisiacal, empty landscapes that function as playgrounds for white people. By reproducing the narrative tropes that frame the foreign imaginary of the Pacific, the images of real estate and tourism campaigns create a cultural loop in which Pacific landscapes become, once more, saturated with desire.

Visual representations enable the colonization of space, which is not only “about soldiers and cannons . . . but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (Said 1993, 7). Ideas of paradise have animated foreign imaginings of “exotic” landscapes for hundreds of years. Colonial expeditions imagined paradise as a kind of New World treasure trove ripe for exploitation. In this way, paradise became linked to the “‘long’ modernity of the capitalist system, implicated in the discourses of material exploitation and colonization” (Deckard 2010, 2–3). From the sixteenth century, the rhetoric of paradise emboldened colonial ventures to find new “treasure lands” where European colonizers could extract

raw materials and slaves (Deckard 2010, 9). These ideas also provided the motivation for the exploration of islands in the Pacific.

Beginning with the first expeditions of James Cook, written accounts of voyages of “discovery” worked alongside images produced by artists who participated in these expeditions, with the result that the European imagination was fueled by visual images of “dusky maidens” (see Tamaira 2010). Materials from the Cook voyages are laden with eroticized images of Polynesian women (Jolly 1997a, 100; Tamaira 2010). With these images, the process of colonization through imposed imagining had begun.

In a continuum from the early voyages of discovery, Pacific landscapes continue to be created through visual representations and geographical imaginings (Harvey 1973, 2006), which inform foreign desire. Considering the social imaginary means considering how ideas of places are created and fashioned in ways that in turn create agency (Appadurai 1995). Sharae Deckard highlighted how the paradise trope shows a historical and continuing relationship with both the history of colonization and “its perseverance as a fantasy in late capitalist modernity, now operating within the discourses of tourism and the postcolonial exotic” (2010, 1). Writing of images of Tahiti through time, Miriam Kahn commented, “Tahiti acquired its perceived value through the use of imagery depicting pastoral landscapes of late-eighteenth-century paintings, virile men and seductive women in Hollywood films, postcards of white-sand beaches, blue lagoons, and smiling Tahitians, and now Internet images of the same. Through the manipulation of these signs and symbols, value becomes externalized, objectified, commodified, and deeply desired” (2014, 153). Advertisements for real estate and investment, cultural tourism, and voyeuristic travel through media—whether a nineteenth-century novel, postcard, film, documentary, photographs, or “reality” television series—result in the Pacific being constructed as an idealized utopian paradise.

Like the images of Tahiti described by Kahn, in Vanuatu, visual images of landscapes are not esoteric; rather, they are potent and everyday representations that consciously refashion ideas of a place. Using the experiences of the filming of reality television, as well as the images deployed in the entwined sectors of tourism and real estate, this article describes how the cultivation of foreign desire has resulted in the large-scale leasing of customary lands across the Vanuatu archipelago, but most extensively on the central island of Efate. With a landmass of 899.5 square kilometers (347.3 square miles), Efate Island hosts the capital city of Port Vila

and a population of 78,721 people. Statistics from 2010 suggest that 56.5 percent or 121.5 kilometers of coastal Efate is under lease (Scott and others 2012, 2). Here, as elsewhere in Vanuatu, reality television, tourism, and real estate advertise the commodification of place as paradise and in the process enable the possession of the landscape by foreigners and the dispossession of local inhabitants. Unpacking these images reveals the politics and fiscal realities that operate in the context of global capitalism to create visions of “paradise,” thereby obscuring the tensions caused by tourism and land sales.

NORTH EFATE AS A *SURVIVOR* PLAYGROUND

North Efate is a region that stretches along the coastline of Efate Island roughly from Tuktuk Point in the south to Samoa Point in the north. From a mountainous, volcanic inland the landscape quickly descends down steep escarpments to the coast, through reefs to the deep waters of Havannah Harbour. Since the mid-2000s, the Lelepa people of North Efate have experienced the voracious leasing of large areas of coastal customary land. Much of this land has subsequently been subdivided and resold as small blocks of coastal beachfront estates to expatriate investors (mainly Australians and New Zealanders) as locations for houses. Some of the blocks of subdivided land have become commercial developments, and the coastal estate of Havannah Harbour is now the location of Vanuatu’s only five-star resort (aptly named “The Havannah”) as well as numerous smaller resorts and a scattering of restaurants.

The story of this land rush in North Efate is entwined with the filming of the *Survivor* reality television series. In the mid- to late 2000s, North Efate hosted the filming of three versions of the *Survivor* series: the American *Survivor: Vanuatu—Islands of Fire*, the Australian *Celebrity Survivor*, and the French *Koh Lanta*. The best known of these was the American *Survivor: Vanuatu*, with the season being filmed on location from 28 June to 5 August 2004 (Burnett and others 2004). Exploration of the *Survivor* “playground” allows consideration of the ways in which place is represented to foreigners who enter the landscape of North Efate—either as contestants in the reality television series, or, subsequently, as purchasers of real estate.¹

The *Survivor* television narrative involves a group of “adventurers” traveling from the “civilized” world to unexplored territory (Delisle 2003, 45–46). The first episode of the Vanuatu series opens with imagery of

the host Jeff Probst “conquering” Yasur Volcano (which is actually on Tanna Island). As the camera pans across Mele Cascades waterfall (back on Efate), Probst’s voice-over begins:

We are . . . in the nation of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. It is a land with a fascinating history of cannibalism, where rituals like sorcery and black magic are still a part of daily life.

As “adventurers,” the competitors (and audience) have landed into an exotic landscape captured by the alterative narratives of colonial encounters. On the one hand, the game is portrayed as a kind of Treasure Island with money to be won. On the other, the host introduces the idea of dangers lurking for the competitors—a “Heart of Darkness” narrative, complete with cannibalism and black magic.

A particular aesthetic is required for the backdrop in the *Survivor* series: a manufactured, picturesque landscape rendered terra nullius (an empty landscape free of claims of possession), so described to reference the British colonial settlement in Australia that was based on the legal fiction that the continent *was* literally empty of people. The landscapes for the series are “nostalgically constructed as anachronistic space, as places where one may remember this lost history of simple living. Where, in effect, time has stood still” (Delisle 2003, 44). In the opening scenes of the first episode of the Vanuatu series, the camera follows the edge of Efate Island and zooms down to a yacht heading across the waters of Havannah Harbour with the competitors aboard before panning across vast areas of Efate and Tanna islands. These shots have been carefully manipulated so that the landscape is rendered terra nullius; only the host and the contestants remain visible in an otherwise empty, uninhabited landscape.

Competitors—who are termed “castaways” in the promotional material for the show—and the armchair tourists who make up the audience “seek unspoiled beaches or primitive habitations as signifiers of other, exotic locales” (Delisle 2003, 43; Burnett and others 2004). This anachronistic Pacific backdrop allows the competitors and the viewers to imagine that they have “returned to a primitive, untouched world” (Delisle 2003, 47).

Toward the end of the opening sequence of *Survivor: Vanuatu*, the yacht full of competitors lets down its anchor. At the same time, a flotilla of canoes enters the water from the mainland, Efate Island, near Mangaliliu Village. Painted and costumed for television in pseudo-custom designs from across Vanuatu, the Lelepa men cry out as they paddle toward the yacht. On board the yacht, the *Survivor* competitors look nervous. Finally,

the *Survivor* host is lifted from a canoe and onto the yacht. With the host's appearance, the competitors look relieved—they have been saved from an encounter with the “natives.” Once on board, the host begins his scripted narrative:

The game is about to begin, but before it does, you have to be *granted access to the land*. So you are going to take part in a tribal ritual. It is a rite of passage and an invitation to *stay on the land*. . . . Chief Mormor is going to preside over all of this; he is a real chief [emphasis added].

Like the first explorers on ships, the competitors must be granted access to the land by a chief.

As the contestants land on the beach, another group of Lelepa men run at them with spears. In his later commentary, one contestant, John, stated, “There were a bunch of tribesmen running with spears. My first reaction was ‘What is going on? What? Are we supposed to defend ourselves?’” This first episode of the television series is titled “They Came at Us with Spears,” and it is clear whom the audience is supposed to identify with in this “Us” and “Others” description. The staged performance of this opening sequence is a reenacted moment of “first contact” that is only plausibly possible if the landscape seems to be inhabited by “savages.” According to the internal logic of the series, it is a landscape in need of discovery. In a later part of the opening sequence, Chief Mormor grunts and mimes the act of kava drinking to the male competitors. In reality, Chief Kalkot Mormor speaks excellent English but cannot of course do so with the contestants, as this would vitiate the trope of “savagery.” The opening scenes finish with Chief Mormor killing a pig in front of the competitors, who are visibly shocked: It is their “first contact” with the “culture” of the “savages.”²

The “access to land” once granted to *Survivor* has been difficult to contain. Writing more than a decade ago, Lamont Lindstrom concluded that the *Survivor: Vanuatu* series seemed “not to have had much lasting local impact” (2007, 171), but with the greater passage of time and a deeper understanding of the North Efate landscape, this initial assessment appears quite wrong. The *Survivor* television series lent the landscape of North Efate an international recognition. Locally, the main beach areas from the American show, located along the coastline toward Tuk-Tuk point opposite Artok Island, became known as “*Survivor* men’s” and “*Survivor* women’s” beaches—a renaming of the landscape in reference to the American series. At the completion of the American *Survivor*, filming

investors vied for local men to sell them customary land at the location of the “*Survivor* beaches.” As one Lelepa man described, “After *Survivor* went on the TV people came for the land. *Survivor* advertised our land, then everyone wanted to buy the land” (interview with Lelepa man, Nov 2014). In their narratives of leasing, Lelepa men identify the filming of the *Survivor* series as the beginning of the rapacious North Efate land rush. According to the many Lelepa men I interviewed, *Survivor* created investor interest in customary land and simultaneously the “vision” among local men of the cash money that could be made from leasing land. The influence that the filming of the *Survivor* series had on the leasing of customary land was described to me, during a workshop attended by eighty to one hundred Lelepa men, as follows:

Survivor made the land sales. When the land sales on the *Survivor* beaches started then after that all men had the vision of land sales. Many custom owners went to find investors in town. Many investors came to find custom owners to sell them *Survivor* beach land. There were many real estate agents too who said, “I have got money to buy your land and investors who are interested, if you are interested in selling.” (interview with Lelepa men, May 2011)

The *Survivor* series enabled the reenvisioning of the landscape in North Efate, from a landscape held under customary tenure to a landscape commodified as property and turned into cash.

PARADISE COMMODIFIED: REAL DREAM ESTATE

The filming of the *Survivor* television series and the subsequent land rush illustrates how long-established tropes—paradisiacal empty landscapes and anachronistic time, as well as the threatened darkness and menace of “savagery”—continue to inform how foreigners engage with landscapes in the Pacific. These narrative tropes create a cultural loop: An imagined landscape becomes a site of desire, the desirability of the landscape creates the commodification of customary land, and the foreign buyer purchases customary land to replicate and experience “paradise.” In Vanuatu, tourism and real estate are entwined, with both sectors creating emotional images in the minds of foreigners that are projected on to physical places “in ways that successfully respond to, and rekindle, the imaginary” (Kahn 2003, 307).

The way paradise tropes inform the geographical imaginary of the Pacific is evident in the popular tourist day trip around Efate Island. Real

estate billboards that line the ring road celebrate the imaginary of the Pacific as paradise by advertising land for sale as “Paradise Found.” This is a destination so utopian it exists only in dreams furnished by a company called “Real Dream Estate” (figure 1).

The “Paradise Found” real estate advertisement is designed in the style



FIGURE 1 Paradise Found Real Estate sign, located near Eton beach, Efate Island, 22 September 2014. Photo by author.

of a mid-twentieth-century adventure book cover, creating a cultural arc back to earlier fictional representations of the Pacific in popular “pulp fiction.” The imagery is the iconic motif of paradise: A young “native” girl dances under a large full moon, her breast clearly outlined, as lagoon waters appear to gently lap and palm trees appear to sway.

These real estate billboards are the stuff of carefully contrived fantasy, the allure of a place replete with foreign visions. Further along the road, a second Real Dream Estate sign is a reproduced copy of Gauguin’s 1892 painting, *Arearea (Joyousness)*. Here the real estate company has chosen Gauguin’s image of Tahitian women as an entry point for the cultivation of foreign desire, in which bodies and landscapes become merged. Kahn wrote that, in Tahiti, no one has played a more powerful role than Gauguin in creating an enduring vision of the people and the landscape (2003). It is these powerful and potent images that are now used to sell customary land in Vanuatu. On this real estate sign, two women sit under a palm tree; the woman in the foreground looks coyly at the viewer with curiosity. In the image, one woman is bare from the waist up, and the other has largely uncovered shoulders, illustrating clothing never worn by ni-Vanuatu women. The image represents an imagined “native” femininity and a contrived vision of paradise inhabited by Gauguin’s fetishized Tahitian women. Like the landscapes illustrated by early expedition artists, these real estate signs are peopled with alluring “dusky maidens.” These real estate images rearticulate the long-established cultural motifs associated with Pacific landscapes, evoking both heterosexual masculine desire and an established cultural authenticity through which foreign ideas are transposed onto customary land in Vanuatu.

That these real estate images reproduce existing cultural images is essential to establishing an “authentic” claim to paradise within the mind of foreign viewers. Early imaginings of Tahiti have been central to establishing these enduring cultural motifs; the “myth of Tahiti is like a pebble that centuries ago was tossed into the water, rippling far and wide, lapping at distant shores, and piquing imaginations around the world” (Kahn 2003, 309). It is ironic that Gauguin’s own canvases were based largely on mythic, fictitious fantasies rather than actual Polynesian women or depictions of the landscape, with Gauguin himself claiming that he painted not from Tahitian life but from his “wildest imagination” (Kahn 2003, 315). In the shifting iconography of paradise, the carefully curated images of “Tahiti”—itself an artifice—are now used to advertise the sale of custom-

ary land in Vanuatu. These advertisements reveal that it is not the actual landscape that foreigners purchase but rather the allegorical layering of cultural motifs that create the landscape as a site of desire. Gauguin's images have come to represent a generalized iconic reenvisioning of the Pacific, regardless of how far away Vanuatu is from Tahiti or France. Foreign dreams are transposed onto Pacific landscapes in ways that demonstrate little consciousness of local realities. The imagery of real estate advertisement and tourism marketing is designed to conceal the social tensions associated with land leasing, as well as the conquest inherent in customary land transactions, whereby investors take the lion's share of profits (McDonnell 2015, 2016).

PARADISE AS PROPERTY

Across the Pacific, real estate advertisements function to commodify paradise as “property.” The idea of property established by Pacific real estate advertisements allows a particular voyeuristic envisaging of landscapes that both distance and objectify, enabling commoditization (Rose 1994, 271). Visual representations such as maps, real estate advertisements, and tourism campaigns allow for the creation of land as property, removed from the socially embedded landscapes of indigenous people. Visual representations construct places in the mind of the viewer. Real estate advertisements carefully manufacture an aesthetic based on the *terra nullius* trope, thereby creating a landscape empty of local people, awaiting possession. Representations of landscapes in real estate include images of landscapes unpeopled or peopled by a single white person. These representations function as a visual reduction of the landscape; they render the landscape flat, with a single meaning: property.

Visual images produced in real estate and tourism create visual references to “paradise” and “virgin,” uninhabited landscapes, which visually displaces Indigenous inhabitants, effectively obscuring the tensions associated with contemporary land dealings and tourism. This reenvisioning of customary landscapes as “real estate” creates an ahistorical and atemporal experience of land, existing only at the moment of the gaze. The visual representations of the land echo the “act of imagination” central to property—that it is possible to buy an exclusive right to possession (Rose 1994, 271–272). On Efate Island, the concocted amnesia of untouched landscapes displaces historical understandings of the landscape as previ-

ously leased and used for large-scale copra plantations, ignoring the thousands of years of gardening that have taken place in the landscape, and, most importantly, omitting the fact that Indigenous occupation dates from at least three thousand years ago (Bedford, Siméoni, and Lebot 2017). Mimicking colonial acts of “discovery,” the planting of the colonizer’s flag morphs into the erecting of a real estate billboard, with “first contact” occurring at the moment a foreign gaze rests upon the real estate sign. Fantasized ideas of paradise provide a form of visual colonization by allowing the viewer to overlook the actual historical, cultural, and social realities associated with the place.

Visual representations offer an illusion of paradise, entreating the viewer to purchase the imaginative narratives associated with descriptions of landscapes. Reproduced “touristic” images of real estate are “unimaginatively similar” and function as commodified constructions of place (Kahn 2000, 16). These curated images are largely interchangeable with each other and those in brochures for tourist destinations; they foreground white sand beaches, crystal blue water, and abundant palm trees. Across Vanuatu, real estate advertisements repeat—almost continuously—the same visual metaphor of an empty “virgin” landscape ready to be colonized. Tourism effortlessly glides into land purchasing, and real estate advertisements read like a utopian vision of an “unspoiled landscape” empty of people—a “land time forgot.”

Tourism and real estate advertisements are economically motivated by the constellation of investor interests that intersect in these conjoined sectors. Advertisements describing Vanuatu as paradise also promote what the French call a financial paradise (*paradis fiscal*) (van Fossen 2012, 4). On the Destination Vanuatu website is written, “It is rare to find the combination of a fiscal and tropical paradise which exists in Vanuatu” (PG IT Consulting and MMA Consulting, 2017). Flows of funds in and out of off-shore financial sectors are easily laundered through the purchase of land in Vanuatu, and the sectors are interlinked. Greg Rawlings wrote, “when islands and their enclaves promote themselves as tax havens, they in a sense attract new kinds of ‘beachcombers’—bankers, investors, financiers, expatriates—who temporarily colonise their shores” (1999, 48; 2002). In this context, Vanuatu becomes a destination framed by the colonial imaginings of a treasure trove with land deals ripe for plunder and supplies of cheap black labor. Land transactions financed through these off-shore accounts are the frontier between the global forces of capital, the emplaced local, and the idealized “fiscal paradise.”

ADVENTURES IN PARADISE

Real estate and tourism advertisements echo the formulas of earlier colonial art and “South Seas” cinema where contrived Pacific backdrops were designed to allow voyeuristic encounters with idealized landscapes and fetishized women. Pacific cinema involved the “sinister conflation” of supposed ethnographic realism with the overt romanticism of Pacific peoples and places (Mawyer 1998, 460; Landman and Ballard 2010, 13). Cinematic representations were less about the South Seas than a reflection of foreign yearnings for romanticized escapism (Rampell 1983, 23). Many of these films represented Polynesian women through a profoundly romanticized male gaze, condensing place with women’s bodies (Jolly 1997b).

One of the most famous of the South Seas films was the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical based on James A Michener’s book *South Pacific*, which combined “colonial-settler mythology, sexual fantasy and frontier hero narrative” (O’Dwyer 1995, 129). The drama of the musical and film are situated on the mythical fantasy island of Bali Ha’i, which offers an Edenic image of lush, fecund foliage with deep plunging waterfalls inhabited by Polynesian beauties who dive and play in the “natural” beauty of the staged landscape (Jolly 1997a, 111).

The island of Bali Ha’i functions as a dreamy, anachronistic Pacific backdrop against which the romance unfolds. Before Bloody Mary, a Vietnamese merchant, sings the song “Bali Ha’i,” she offers a pantomime of a tourist encounter, offering our hero, Lieutenant Cable, a carved, wooden “cannibal head” for sale, thereby evoking the idea of the primitivism of the local “savages.” The lieutenant rejects her offer and asks where the head came from, and she points to the island of Bali Ha’i. The volcanic peaks of the island glow and throb in the distance in technicolor splendor as Bloody Mary asks the American hero, “Can you hear it calling you?” before she breaks into song:

Most people live on a lonely island,
Lost in the middle of a foggy sea,
Most people long for another island,
One where they know they would like to be.
Bali Ha’i may call you,
Any night, any day,
In your heart you’ll hear it call you,
“Come away, come away . . .”
Bali Ha’i will whisper,

On the wind of the sea,
 “Here am I, your special island,
 “Come to me, come to me . . .”
 Your own special hopes,
 Your own special dreams,
 Bloom on the hillside,
 And shine in the streams . . .

(Bali Ha'i, lyrics by Rodgers and Hammerstein 1949, emphasis added)

The mythic Bali Ha'i functions as an enthralling backdrop on which to transpose foreign “hopes” and “dreams” of romantic encounters and of life in an idyllic Pacific paradise (Jolly 1997a). The wording of Bloody Mary's song suggests that female allure is synonymous with the physical locale of the island as she sings, “Here am I, your special island, come to me, come to me.” The lyrics point to the idea of the island as a geographically confined space functioning as the site of desire.

Explorations of Michener's work suggest a particularly masculine conception of Pacific paradise in which the desire for the place is linked with the women who inhabit the landscape, in a continuum of early colonial tropes. Following on the success of *South Pacific*, Michener wrote and produced a television series called *Adventures in Paradise*, which was based on the character of a captain of a yacht called the *Tiki* sailing the Pacific in search of romantic adventure and solving mysteries along the way. Michener's introduction to the first episode of *Adventures in Paradise* is revealing of his vision of the Pacific as a paradise embodied by “desirable women” (Sturma 2002, 2). Indeed, Michener's paradise is a male frontier adventure complete with the fetishization of local women. It is glaringly incongruous that the “local women” in Michener's productions and stories—the women located in these artificially constructed Pacific stages—are rarely “local.” In *South Pacific*, the romantic interest of Lieutenant Cable is a Tonkinese woman and, while Cable later sings a song decrying racism as “carefully taught,” it is a song directed at his love for an Asian rather than a Pacific woman (Jolly 1997a, 112–113). The second love story takes place between Nellie, an American nurse, and Emile, a French plantation owner. Similarly, American actresses regularly played the “local” women in *Adventures in Paradise*. In these images the imagined Pacific provides a backdrop for romance between foreigners, rather than with locals.

In the Pacific, pasts prevail and continue to illuminate contemporary foreign tourism. Michener's narrative tropes continue to function as a

referent for tourists traveling in Sāmoa and Vanuatu, with Michener’s literary descriptions of place and characters forming the basis for both contemporary tourism materials and travel writing, functioning as a type of discursive neo-romanticism (for a discussion of the influence of Michener in tourism in Sāmoa, see Thompson 2014). A Vanuatu tourism website evokes these discourses: “There is a definite Michener influence still to be found today. . . . It was on Santo that James A Michener gazing out to the distant Ambae Island and watching it disappear and reappear in the sea mist wrote his epic ‘Tales of the South Pacific’ and in his imagination, named the island ‘Bali Hai’” (Our Pacific 2018). Michener’s fictional landscape thus becomes an imaginative gateway through which tourists are encouraged to encounter Vanuatu—to experience Michener’s contrived landscape by recreating his masculine, colonialist gaze.

Colonial houses are enveloped in the mythmaking attached to Michener as a writer and the characters in his stories, with views of Ambae appearing and disappearing into the mist (Lagarde 2016). In these accounts, the island of Ambae is stripped of indigenous stories of ancestral figures and creation and renamed as the mythical Bali Ha’i to serve as a backdrop for tourists. On the island resort of Iririki, tourists can dine in the Bali Ha’i cafe and create their own romantic encounters in settings designed to invoke Michener’s imagined backdrop, all facilitated by the Vanuatu tourism company “Adventures in Paradise.”

In North Efate, encounters between locals with the *Survivor* film crews, as well as the resulting land rush, occasionally demonstrate aspects of local indigenous “repossession” of the narrative and visual tropes embedded within the *Survivor* series. Watching the original American *Survivor* television series with a room full of Lelepa friends, people would often gasp in wonder at the aerial visuals of the coastal landscapes and islands that they lived on. These images were often discussed with an intense pride in the natural beauty of the landscape being represented to a global audience.

Powerful Lelepa men have also been instrumentally involved in seizing the opportunities offered by *Survivor* tourism and land sales. During filming, the American *Survivor* crew was hosted by Lelepa man Gideon Manalpa on customary land located on the edge of Havannah Harbour. As the land rush began, Gideon was one of the first men involved in leasing another plot of customary land located near *Survivor* beach. Using the money earned from leasing his customary land, as well as from hosting the American *Survivor* crew, Gideon built a tourism business on his Havannah Harbour land. In yet another twist to the story, the material used in the

Survivor television series is now physically embedded in Gideon's tourism business. Close to the water in the main farea-style café built by Gideon, the rock carved by one of the "tribes" during the filming of the *Survivor* series is prominently displayed on the base of the bar, its central location signaling the primary importance of the *Survivor* series to enabling the re-visioning of the customary landscape for a tourism business.³ The rock also provides a central motif for tourists visiting Havannah Harbour in search of a "*Survivor*" experience.

PARADISE AS A PLAYGROUND FOR WHITE PEOPLE

The idea of repossession allows us to consider the agency of indigenous people in employing the narratives and visual tropes attached to Pacific landscapes. However, it is also apparent that images of "the Pacific" offer foreign audiences a series of seemingly interchangeable, romanticized locations that supposedly exist beyond the demands of the industrialized capitalist complex. Representations of the Pacific in reality television, real estate advertisements, and tourism campaigns offer access to a commodified, reenvisioned paradise, overwhelmingly represented as a playground for white people. White, bikini-clad women are a regular motif in real estate and tourism images across the Pacific, serving as a reminder of who is defining this "paradise" (see figures 2–4). The gaze, in continuity with earlier representations of the Pacific, remains profoundly male. Images of a white woman in a bikini lying on a beach against a Pacific backdrop are so often repeated that they establish their own internal authenticity or a culturally ingrained sense of the familiar (Kahn 2014, 161). The images themselves are reproduced en masse and available for purchase from international photography firms such as Getty Images. More often than not, they are the fabric from which marketing campaigns are stitched.

The allure of Pacific landscapes is attached to the desire for the women who inhabit these otherwise empty, contrived scenes. That the female figure is white repeats long-established practices of transposing sexual desire for particular types of women into Pacific scenery. In his production of postcards and calendar images of Tahiti and Tahitian women, Kahn wrote that photographer Tera Sylvain mainly employs non-Tahitian women, crowning their heads with flowers or placing a hibiscus flower behind an ear to create a local flavor (2014). Much like Gauguin before him, Sylvain

recognizes that “men who visit Tahiti want a woman they already possess in their head or in their libido” (Kahn 2014, 157). Foreign male tourists or real estate purchasers seek a playmate in their Pacific landscape.

Images of white, bikini-clad women lying on beaches or playing in Pacific locales are highly provocative, given the history of the bikini. No doubt few tourists are aware that the bathing suit was named after Bikini Atoll, which from 1946–1958 was the site of the testing of twenty-three nuclear bombs that resulted in severe and enduring health and ecological consequences for Marshall Islanders. Teresia Teaiwa wrote that, given the history of the garment, the bikini bathing suit “is testament to the recurring tourist trivialization of Pacific Islanders’ experience and existence” (1994, 87). Teaiwa argued that the naming of the garment as a “bikini” plays into coded references of Islanders as “exotic,” drawing references to the scantily clad “dusky maidens” of earlier colonial representations (1994, 93). Given the contemporary juxtaposition of the bathing suit with a repeatedly bombed and irradiated Bikini Atoll, Teaiwa stated: “By drawing attention to a sexualized and supposedly depoliticized female body, the bikini distracts from the colonial and highly political origins of its name. The sexist dynamic the bikini performs—objectification through excessive visibility—inverts the colonial dynamics that have occurred during nuclear testing in the Pacific, objectifying by rendering invisible” (1994, 87). Building from the brilliant work of Teaiwa and expanding from the specific horrors of Bikini Atoll to other visual images of Pacific places, it becomes obvious that tropical scenes that center on a white woman in a bikini work to effectively displace Pacific bodies from the landscape.

Images of white women located in Eden-like scenes are such established motifs that they encourage an intimacy of the viewer with Pacific landscapes. Adria Imada made this point as she described the use of hula girl imagery to create an “imagined intimacy” with Hawai‘i (2011). These are not simply images of sex, sand, and sea; they are images that flatten the landscape by obscuring other histories of people and place. By centering on white, female, and scantily clad bodies, the visual images enable foreign claims to possession, whether through tourism or real estate.

Like earlier cinema, the Pacific in real estate and tourism campaigns functions as a backdrop; Pacific landscapes become romantic playgrounds for white, heterosexual couples. If and when a man is included in the scene, it is a white man joining his lover (figure 2). Aside from the white people who inhabit the landscapes of real estate and tourism images,



FIGURES 2–4 (*above and on facing page*) Images of a couple lying next to Champagne Beach on Santo Island; a bikini-clad white woman riding a horse with a small, smiling child; and a couple playing in blue waters, for the Vanuatu “Discover What Matters” tourism campaign, 2014. Photos by David Kirkland, reproduced courtesy of Vanuatu Tourism Office.



an occasional local—a smiling child or group of smiling children—may compose the scene, creating the visual motif that the Pacific is a welcoming place where people are happy and friendly (Kahn 2014, 154; Taylor 2017). Local children present a simplistic, carefree, nonthreatening image to foreign viewers (figure 3).

The final image from a Vanuatu Tourism campaign, “Discover what really matters,” shows a white couple smiling and embracing while swimming. In this image, the Vanuatu landscape is represented by ubiquitous blue waters, suggesting that in reality the image could have been shot almost anywhere; “what matters” is that the landscape provides a backdrop for romance and fun. The subject of the image is the white, heterosexual couple; it is *their* paradise.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF POSSESSING PARADISE

Ideas of Pacific Islands as an “unspoiled” paradise are deeply political in that they subvert alternative accounts of places offered by Indigenous inhabitants. Commodifying the Pacific as paradise allows foreigners to purchase either a tourist playground or customary land saturated with desire. The conception of Pacific Islands as paradise seems to retain an

obdurate significance almost in spite of the lived reality of the inhabitants of these places or the politics of tourism and real estate endeavors.

Visual representations of customary land as empty are produced by political and financial motivations. The *terra nullius* aesthetic maintained by real estate advertisements in Vanuatu is at odds with constitutional guarantees that the land is held by custom owners in perpetuity. This reenvisioning of landscape as an empty paradise masks the deep contestations that take place in villages over land sales as well as the ongoing Indigenous occupation of the landscape. Visual images of Vanuatu landscapes obscure issues of race and make allowable acts of recolonization of the landscape by expatriates.

Informed by predefined visions of Pacific places, tourist experiences and real estate purchases can be alarmingly dislocated from the lived realities of Indigenous inhabitants. Tourists staying in rural Vanuatu are unaware of the deeply contested dealings over customary land on which their foreign-owned resorts are located. Historically, customary land has often been leased without the consent, or even awareness, of the broader customary landowning group (see McDonnell 2013, 2017). Resorts located on the main island of Efate along Pango Point and in North Efate are often sites of local disputes over landownership and the cash benefits that accrue from land leasing. Disputes over land leasing are closely associated with claims of sorcery, described in Vanuatu as the practice of *nakaemas* (McDonnell 2015).

Tourist developments often involve legal arrangements designed to alienate customary land from Indigenous inhabitants. Although Vanuatu's constitution states that all land belongs to custom owners in perpetuity, in rural areas leases for expatriate housing and large-scale development, such as tourist resorts, often stipulate that there must be compensation for all infrastructure development and other "improvements" to the land at the end of the term of the lease. The inclusion of "improvements clauses" in lease instruments is now established practice in Vanuatu, and many of the leases located on the coastline of Havannah Harbour include these clauses. While it is likely that these improvement clauses are unconstitutional, there is no instance where the legal validity of the clauses has been legally challenged, as all leases in Vanuatu were entered into after independence in 1980 and have yet to reach the seventy-five-year term. If these clauses were deemed to be legal, the result would likely be the alienation of Indigenous people from the land as it appears highly unlikely

that custom owners would be able to generate the cash required to compensate for improvements to the customary land. Accordingly, land built on by outsiders would effectively become alienated from the customary landscape by the requirement of compensation.

Real estate and tourism developments involve the material possession of the landscape, often far beyond actual legal entitlements. To mark their physical possession of the landscape, resort owners often build large walls and gates around the boundaries of their leased land, preventing local inhabitants both from accessing the land and from going through the land to the coastal estates. Often these fences contain land and beachfront that is not legally owned. The legal boundaries of all leased land end at the medium high-water mark; however, the physical fencing of these spaces marks out their enclosure and material possession of beachfronts beyond any legal entitlement. While a handful of locals are employed as house girls or gardeners in expatriate homes, most ni-Vanuatans are removed and excluded from the ocean and landscapes that they and their ancestors have gardened on, fished in, lived in, and passed through for thousands of years.

The reality of the deep social divisions caused by customary land sales does not fit in the picturesque framing of real estate advertisements or tourism campaigns. The effect of the visual representations of Pacific places through tourism, reality television shows, and real estate is to veil these inequalities and to mask the deep divisions within communities caused by land leasing with images of smiling children and happy, white, heterosexual couples playing in paradise. Images that commodify the Pacific as paradise strip landscapes of Indigenous meanings, ensuring that “what matters” is the cultivation of foreign desire for a utopian destination available for purchase through “real dream estate.” Often, these images are considered benign. In reality, images from television, tourism, and real estate represent the visual vanguard of neocolonial possession by foreigners of Pacific landscapes.

* * *

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Notes

1 Here I am referencing Edvard Hviding's writing on "playgrounds" for foreigners associated with the cultural tourism that has taken place around Marovo Lagoon in Solomon Islands (2003, 549).

2 This "pig killing" scene provoked international outrage when it was aired in the United States and other countries. When the episode was aired in the United States, Jeff Probst, the host of *Survivor*, described the scene in a telephone news conference: "There's a pig killing. I don't know how much they are allowed to show. But it was brutal. That pig was alive. They took a club and beat it to death" (Zurawik 2004). In the same news conference, he also defended the airing of the scene on cultural grounds, arguing that offering the ironic excuses that the show with its manufactured "natives" and landscape was demonstrating cultural integrity: "To them [the Islanders], killing the pig is as common as us going through the drive-through and getting a cheeseburger. It's part of their culture, and we are just showing it." International animal rights organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) also instigated legal action against the producer of *Survivor* for the pig killing. Pig killing was repeated in a subsequent series, *Survivor: The Australian Outback*.

3 *Farea* is the word used in central Vanuatu for a chief's house, often termed a *nakamal* in other parts of Vanuatu.

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Abstract

In a continuum from early voyages of “discovery,” Pacific landscapes continue to be created through the visual representations and geographical imaginings that inform foreign desires. Just as early exploration narratives and paintings fashioned the Pacific as an exotic Eden peopled with alluring women, contemporary media manufactures Pacific landscapes as sites of desire. Beginning with the film-

ing of the *Survivor* reality television series, this article explores how the visual representations and narrative tropes attached to Efate Island in Vanuatu were instrumental in the commodification of customary land as real estate, subsequently sold to expatriates for tourism resorts and residential housing. Television, tourism, and real estate images are not benign. In these images the landscape is rendered *terra nullius*—absent of local inhabitants and ripe for possession—enabling the neocolonial possession of Pacific landscapes by foreigners and the dispossession of local Indigenous inhabitants.

KEYWORDS: customary land, tourism, real estate, reality television, paradise, Vanuatu, bikini